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ABSTRACT

The Board of Regents of South Dakota's public colleges and universities decided in 1984 to implement a Value-Added Testing program (an exit test required for graduation) modelled on the Northeast Missouri State University plan. The plan was intended to increase student learning, improve curricular design, and encourage excellent teaching. Value-Added Testing, in practice, is a set of tests and retests administered to determine what the students have learned. The items they have picked up is the value students have gained from their education. Despite protests, the Regents insisted on using what they thought were nationally normed tests instead of tests created by the individual institutions. They also charged students for taking the tests and demanded a list of the students who did not take the tests. Baccalaureate degrees were withheld from those who did not take the exit tests. Several questions arose concerning the use of the two components of the Value-Added Testing program, the National Teacher Examination and the Graduate Record Examination, as the only tests of a curriculum: (1) Can a curriculum designed for a particular institution be tested against national norms? (2) Are multiple choice examinations effective tests? and (3) Should nationally normed tests be used to define a rapidly changing curriculum? (SRT)

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Putting Your Major to the Test: Value-Added Testing in the English Department

Alice T. Gasque

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Putting Your Major To The Test:

Value-Added Testing in the English Department

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Imagine your Board of Regents, alerted by many of the recent reports of what is wrong with American undergraduate education, convinced that they can test the quality of the curricula with one ready-made, simple assessment plan. Suppose that they mandate a state-wide Value-Added Testing program today and order its full implementation by tomorrow morning.

Consider how thrilled all of your graduating seniors will be when they learn that they will not receive baccalaureate degrees at the end of the semester unless they pay for and take either the Subject NTE or the Advanced Literature GRE. Imagine yourself, as a faculty member in this institution which has had a dark and stormy relationship with the Board of Regents. You know that most of the crises in the last ten years have involved reducing or eliminating programs. Because you envision programs being reduced or eliminated, you urge your students to do as well as they can. Unfortunately, your students see no merit in taking the exit exam at all and some of the brightest students tell you that they plan to sabotage their scores because they regard the regents' mandate as a violation of contract. Their college catalogue never mentioned that taking an exit test was a requirement for graduation.

After the scores are returned to you, you notice that approximately half of the students who took the GRE have very low or no scores (near or at the zero percentile). When you check the scores against the students' cumulative grade point averages and against their ACT scores, you find serious discrepancies. Did your students do what they threatened to do? Is the curriculum really as bad as the scores seem to suggest? Here's a Value-Added

Test for you. Under the circumstances described, what would you do?

A) Resign immediately and urge your colleagues to do likewise since you are ineffective teachers in a program with a lousy curriculum;

B) Redesign your curriculum and teach to the test;

C) Argue with the Board of Regents about the flaws in the concept and in the implementation of the test package they mandated and offer a locally developed testing program as a replacement;

D) Appear on a panel at NCTE to warn others of impending doom.

As you may have already guessed, all, any combination, or none of the above may be the correct answer.

In South Dakota, we never even had a chance. Our regents saw Value-Added Testing as a dream come true. In the summer of 1984, a Value-Added Testing program modelled on the Northeast Missouri State University plan took effect in all public colleges and universities. By the spring of 1985, Value-Added Testing was fully implemented. Now, nearly two years later, is Value-Added Testing a dream come true, or simply a nightmare?

The plan adopted by the regents promised to increase student learning, improve curricular design, and encourage excellent teaching--clearly promising a dream come true. Northeast Missouri State University defined "Value-Added" as "a college or university's ability to make a positive, measurable difference in each student's intellectual and personal development" (Smith 1).

The concept of Value-Added Testing is fairly simple to understand. If you think about students as consumers and the education that they receive as products that can be counted, you should be able to measure what those products have added to the consumers by strip-searching them before they come into the store and by counting the items they pick up before exiting. What they learn is the value added by their education.

In practice, "Value-Added" is a set of tests and retests. The freshman

class is divided into two groups in order to measure the value added by the general education courses (such as math and English) which students generally take during their freshman and sophomore years. The first group takes the ACT-COMP test at the beginning of their first year and then repeats the same test at the end of their second year. The second group retakes the same ACT assessment test they took before entering college when they reach the end of their second year in college.

Our "Value-Added" plan also includes the two exit tests I mentioned earlier: the Subject NTE (if the student happened to take the education block courses), or the Subject GRE if one exists. The testing plan puts both the general education requirement courses and the major to the test because the scores can be compared at the freshman, sophomore, and senior levels not only across the curriculum, but across different campuses as well. The regents selected what they thought were nationally normed, identical instruments in order to be able to make these kinds of comparisons.

Terry Smith, the Dean of Students at Northeast Missouri State and the chief consultant for the South Dakota Regents, acknowledged that different kinds of institutions might have different missions and constituencies and he urged that the regents allow "considerable flexibility in developing testing programs to meet different needs of different curriculum" (Smith 8), but the regents wanted to find out where the highest and lowest scoring programs were located. They were anxious to compare student scores discipline-by-discipline in each institution. They could hardly wait to test our students against what they believed were nationally normed tests.

They ignored much of Smith's advice. He told them to fund the program rather than charge students for the tests because student motivation to perform might be impaired if they were required to pay a "nuisance fee" (Smith 7). Not only did our regents charge the students for the tests, but

they also demanded a list of the names of students who did not take the tests as scheduled and the individual reasons for each non-taker. Students were both threatened and punished by the Board of Regents who withheld baccalaureate degrees for non-takers of the exit tests. No doubt, the regents may find some cruel or unusual punishment for the freshmen and sophomores who (for some reason or other) have been unable or unwilling to take the ACT tests as scheduled.

Smith very accurately assessed the South Dakota pre-test environment as negative because the faculty didn't trust the regents' motives. He warned the regents not to use the data for cross-comparisons. His argument that "the process be engaged in an atmosphere of relative trust" made us wonder which relatives he had in mind (Smith 3). Historically, trust between the faculty and the regents has been rare in South Dakota.

Smith admitted that the instruments might be invalid or inappropriate, but argued that no test is perfect and that any test is better than no test at all. He dismissed objections to using the subject-area GRE to test curriculum with a counter-argument that the GRE defines the "current state of the discipline" (Smith 5). In a separate publication, he suggested that faculty resistance to the GRE could be overcome if faculty members were persuaded to take the tests themselves and if they happened to score in an acceptable percentile (Degrees of Integrity 22). According to Smith, teaching to the test might very well be a positive outcome of Value-Added Testing.

For South Dakota, the regents' dream come true has turned into a nightmare for the faculty and students. Some disciplines, like philosophy, have avoided the close scrutiny of our regents because no GRE exists yet. We have no doubt that many new nationally normed tests will emerge, for several disciplines including philosophy, and we think that the chances are pretty good that they may be imported from New Jersey. As faculty members of South

Dakota English departments, we haven't resigned our positions, but many of us are writing position papers on curriculum, and we are redesigning our curriculum just in case we fail to convince the regents to allow us to substitute a locally developed exit test for the NTE and the GRE. We can see fragmentation in the future for the discipline of English: separate departments for creative writing, expository writing, women's studies, Native American studies, English education, and pre-graduate English studies. If the regents insist that the model used to test undergraduate education must be preparation for the Ph.D. in a specific discipline, the probabilities are that education for undergraduates will become less focused on interdisciplinary studies and more focused on narrowly specific disciplines. Why should we continue to encourage our students to pursue double majors when the real purpose of our curriculum is to increase their scores on a test for post-baccalaureate study?

We wonder whether the entire concept of Value-Added Testing is valid. Can the value of what students learn in college be tested using these procedures? How legitimate is Smith's argument that any test is better than no test? Do the ACT assessment tests really measure what a student learns in college if he or she takes the test as a junior in high school and then retakes the identical test as a sophomore in college? If the test measures anything other than general ability, doesn't it seem likely that a student might learn something about how to take an objective test by taking the same test twice? How do we separate the value added during the first two years in college from the value added during the senior year in high school?

At the University of South Dakota, we worry about the effect of our higher ACT score entrance requirement when we consider the critical relationship between the first and second scores of the ACT assessment examinations. William Donohue, USD Vice President for Student Life, has

noticed a "ceiling effect" of "how well people can perform on exams. If one group has an average pre-test score of 50 percent, it clearly has more room for improvement than another group with an average pre-test score of 90. Ceiling effects, like effects due to regression to the mean, do not exist unless high scoring groups are selected and they can be controlled by use of a comparison group" (Donohue and Struckman-Johnson 6). As Donohue and Struckman-Johnson have noted, USD has no comparison group.

Is the content of the ACT assessment appropriate as a test of our general education requirements? If we require our students to take one course in composition and a second course as an introduction to literature, is it really appropriate to test these courses objectively with an exam focused on traditional grammatical terms? Even if we believe the test to be appropriate, why should we wait until the end of the sophomore year to test material which students should have acquired by the end of their freshman year? Are we trying to test their long-term memory?

We have serious reservations about using the Subject NTE and the Advanced Subject GRE as the sole test of our curriculum. The first question concerns whether a curriculum designed for a particular institution can be tested against national norms. Should we splinter our various tracks in English to protect the creative writing program and the expository writing emphasis from the Advanced Literature GRE? Our Native American literature courses are a distinct feature of our institution--a feature which seldom if ever shows up on the GRE or the NTE. Do we rid our program of its distinctions to increase student scores on standardized, nationally normed tests? Across the state, are all of our English programs identical? Should they be?

The second question concerns the design of the selected exit tests. Few of our students have any practice in taking multiple choice examinations in the discipline. We actually discourage giving and taking multiple choice

examinations because we believe that the design of these tests seriously limits what they can accomplish. We like to think that our students are able to perform at a higher level than passively selecting the best among four or five answers--all of which are given to them. If we give tests (and we do), we often try to design tests which teach our students something, tests which require them to perform: to interpret, to analyze, to find meaning. In most literature classes, reading means more than mere acquaintance with the texts and the memorization of what might be regarded as trivial details. We expect our students to be active readers and to be able to write more about their interpretations than marking a single x on an answer sheet. In our writing courses, we expect our student to be able to write.

Some scholars caution against relying too heavily on multiple-choice exams which do not test the ability to synthesize knowledge. John Harris, of David Lipscomb College in Nashville, Tennessee, argues that 1) multiple choice national tests only require students to recognize correct answers, not produce them; 2) national tests ultimately homogenize general education requirements and major curricular patterns because teachers cannot resist teaching to the test; and 3) national achievement tests are based on a selection test model which measures individual ability variation more than it measures anything else. Harris claims that nationally standardized achievement tests will show little difference between different instructional approaches (this feature is particularly important if the intent of the Value-Added exercise is to improve teaching) and that the "differences of individuals' scores within the instructed group will often be greater than the distinctions between the instructed and the uninstructed groups." For Value-Added Testing, Harris warns that showing significant gains over time will be extraordinarily difficult for any campus using nationally normed tests (7-13).

The third question concerns the definition of a discipline which has

changed considerably during the last hundred years and which is still not entirely fixed. Some disciplines may be so well defined that the canon of definitive texts belonging to the discipline and the attendant canon of the interpretations of those texts are indisputable. In English, we are only beginning to discover our origins and our dimensions as a discipline. Questions about whether there is (or could ever be) a literary canon defining "cultural literacy" are disputed daily in the newspaper by people such as William Bennett and E.D. Hirsch, Jr. If we continue to use the Subject NTE and the Advanced Subject GRE to define our curriculum, we will seriously impair our ability to pursue anything but our past.

During this summer, I was reminded of how often we, as Americans, rely on tests as a teaching technique and as a way to measure what we think we are doing. For four weeks, I was an exchange professor at the University of Oldenburg in West Germany.

A few students in some of my classes in Oldenburg wrote papers (none voluntarily--these were mostly papers required for the degree) but not a single student took a test of any kind. In Germany, sets of entrance and exit tests replace almost all measures of student performance. Students do not receive grades in classes, nor does the university issue lists of students enrolled in classes for their professors. Students either attend or don't attend classes that they think might help them pass the exit tests. German and other European universities offer what appears to be an extreme example of relying heavily on entrance and exit tests. As descendants of European universities, are American institutions following in their footsteps? Are fewer but more significant examinations in our future?

What has happened in South Dakota during the last two years as a result of our Value-Added Testing program is a shift in who controls the curriculum and how disciplines are defined. If the answer to the problem posed by Value-

Added Testing is to redesign the curriculum and teach to the NTE and the GRE (which is what we are doing right now), intellectual curiosity in South Dakota may be defined, codified, and distributed by a large industrial firm located somewhere in New Jersey. Unfortunately, Missouri, the show-me state, settled for a diminished picture--just a negative, and we, the pioneers of South Dakota, followed Missouri into the darkroom.

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